

WORKING WITH PROBATE INVENTORIES: A CLASS ASSIGNMENT IN HISTORICAL METHODS

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Introduction

Probate inventories are listings of property that were sometimes taken upon an individual's death. A team of appraisers would tour the home and lands of the deceased, describing everything of value and assigning an estimated worth. This appraisal would help the administrator or executor of the estate pay off all creditors, with the remainder being distributed according to a will or divided among heirs for those who died intestate. For the past four decades family historians as well as economic and social historians have made extensive use of these inventories, but it is hard to make generalizations about them, as laws governing them vary according to the jurisdiction and year being examined; the literature on probate inventories is consequently very wide-ranging.¹ Used initially for the study of wealth distribution, researchers have also used them to investigate other areas of historical interest. For example, doctors' kits and libraries inform us about the material culture of medicine; word usage and spelling in the lists interest linguists as well as intellectual historians, who also find an indication of the degree of literacy in the number of documents signed by "x" rather than a name; in named books and ownership of Bibles there is evidence of learning and intellectual interests; pottery, dishware, and utensils interest archaeologists; sociologists find status symbols in the details of furnishings, apparel, and cultural objects; agricultural implements tell of farming methods and crop specialization; horses, harness, wagons, and boats indicate modes of production as well as travel; tools speak of craftsmanship; household implements like spinning wheels,

¹The material on early modern France alone is vast and dates back to the seventeenth century: Claude De Ferrière, *La Science parfaite des notaires, ou le moyen de faire un parfait notaire. Contenant les ordonnances, arrêts et reglemens rendus touchant la fonction des Notaires*, 2e éd. (Paris: Charles Osmont, 1686); *Nouvelle introduction à la pratique contenant l'explication des termes de pratique, de droit et de coutumes*, nouv. éd. (Bruxelles: Par la Société, 1739); Guy Cabourdin, "Jalons sur une méthodologie des actes notariés sous l'ancien régime," in *Les Actes notariés: Sources de l'histoire sociale XVIe-XIXe siècle*, Actes du Colloque de Strasbourg (Mars 1978), éd. Bernard Vogler (Strasbourg: Librairie Istra, 1979), 47-69; Bertrand Gautier, "L'habitat des marchands bordelais au XVIIe siècle d'après décès," *Annales du Midi* 108/216 (1996), 505-520; Ralph E. Giesey, "Rules of Inheritance and Strategies of Mobility in Prerevolutionary France," *American Historical Review*, 82:2 (April 1977), 271-289; Julie Hardwick, *The Practice of Patriarchy: Gender and the Politics of Household Authority in Early Modern France* (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1998); Sébastien Jahan, *Profession, parenté, identité sociale: Les notaires de Poitiers aux temps modernes* (Toulouse: Presses universitaires du Mirail, 1999); Jean-Paul Poisson, *Études notariales* (Paris: Éditions Economica, 1996).

wool cards, looms, and soap kettles suggest household production. We can also examine patterns such as the seasonal round of work and the sexual division of labor.²

At first glance these inventories can appear quite daunting and even confusing, as they consist of long lists of material, in no apparent order and with numerous arcane abbreviations. Historians have to learn how to work with them. Accordingly, for my level-three Historical Methods class I put together an active learning module on probate inventories that takes up about three periods of class time.³ The module is designed to introduce students to the comparative method, the study of material culture, the analysis of primary documents, and the use of vital records as a cross-referencing tool. The focus is on the Colonial New England household economy, using a sample of Essex County, Massachusetts, probate inventories from 1774 taken from Alice Hanson Jones, *American Colonial Wealth*.⁴ The early vital records for Essex County from 1600-1849 (the "Tan Books") are available online under "Massachusetts Vital Records 1600-1849."⁵ Other inventories are also available online and in published compilations. The module follows an eclectic approach to teaching and learning that combines lectures and readings with homework and group work on documents.⁶ This will be discussed more extensively in the conclusion.

The Assignment

To introduce the topic and illustrate the kind of work that can be done with this evidence, I first ask the class to read Chapter 1, "The Ways of Her Household," from

²See John Bedell, "Archaeology and Probate Inventories in the Study of Eighteenth Century Life," *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, 31:2 (Autumn 2000), 223-45, and Peter Benes, ed., *Early American Probate Inventories*, assoc. ed., Jane Montgue Benet; contrib eds., Ross W. Beales, Jr. and Kevin M. Sweeney, ed. Advisors Richard M. Candee and Robert F. Trent; The Dublin Seminar for New England Folklife: Annual Proceedings 1987 (Boston: Boston University, 1989). For family history, see Tom Arkell, Nesta Evans, and Nigel Goose, eds., *When Death Do Us Part* (Oxford: Leopard's Head Press, 2000); for medical history, see J.W. Connor, "Estate Records and the History of Medicine in Ontario," *Canadian Bulletin of Medical History*, 10 (1993), 97-114; "Estate Records of Medical Practitioners in Ontario, 1793-1900," *Canadian Bulletin of Medical History*, 10 (1993), 115-43.

³Maryellen Weimer, "Active Learning: Quantity, Extent, Depth, Count," *Teaching Professor*, 10:10 (December 1996), 1.

⁴Alice Hanson Jones, *American Colonial Wealth: Documents and Methods* (New York: Arno Press, 1977), 3 vols.

⁵<http://www.rootsweb.com/~maessex/VitalRecords/>

⁶Anastasia S. Morrone and Terri A. Tarr, "Theoretical Eclecticism in the College Classroom," *Innovative Higher Education*, 30:1 (2005).

Laurel Ulrich's book, *Good Wives*.⁷ This chapter uses exactly the sort of inventory evidence the class needs to examine in order to describe the lot of women in colonial New England. Ulrich first defines the household and then describes the role of women in the domestic economy between 1670 and 1730. She focuses on three inventories and three women (Beatrice Plummer, Amanda Grafton, and Magdalene Wear) who lived in Essex County in the years before 1750. Through an examination of the contents of their household, she is able to sketch out the varied complexity and underlying unity in the lives of these early American women, showing that despite their class differences they all had a common vocation as "good wives."

We spend the first class discussing Ulrich's work, what it tells us about women in Colonial New England, and how she uses the evidence from her probate inventories. I write the names of the three families on the board, discuss how they compare with regard to time, place, and circumstance, and try to discern what might account for the differences. I also distribute some floor plans of typical New England houses to help in the imaginative recreation of eighteenth-century space.⁸

For the second period I ask the class to look at a selection of five inventories from the second volume of Jones' monumental compilation. These inventories all come from small towns in Essex County and date from the year 1774. Each of the documents begins with the name, the hometown, the occupation, and the estimated age ("EA") of the deceased. It then lists all of his or her property, giving the type and quantity in the left-hand column, and the value in pounds ("L"), shillings ("s"), and pence ("d") in the right-hand column. There are twelve pence in a shilling and twenty shillings in a pound. By today's currency, a Massachusetts pound in 1774 would be worth about \$100 (U.S.) today. These inventories were chosen to constitute a representative sample of probated estates from the period and they reflect the norm for coastal New England in the eighteenth century. When I distribute the lists, I ask students to consider what this evidence might tell us about life in colonial New England.

At the beginning of the second period, I divide the thirty students into five groups and assign one inventory to each group. I then ask each group to do three things: (1) list the items in the inventory room by room; (2) draw a floor plan of the house in question; and (3) analyze the household economy based on the material found in the

⁷Laurel Ulrich, *Good Wives: Image and Reality in the Lives of Women in Northern New England, 1650-1750* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983). This whole exercise is based upon a guest lecture first given by Danny Vickers in Chris Youé's "Historical Methods" class at Memorial University in Newfoundland in 1996. It was Vickers who first suggested reading the sample inventories from Jones in conjunction with Ulrich's *Good Wives*. Youé used the idea in subsequent Historical Methods classes; I added the focus on material culture and the cross-referencing to vital records, and also divided the work into three class meetings.

⁸Kimball Fiske, *Domestic Architecture of the American Colonies and of the Early Republic* (New York: Dover, 1966 [c. 1922]).

inventory, explaining what it can tell us about work, leisure, and consumption patterns in New England in 1774, paying particular attention to the woman's role. I then circulate among the groups to check on progress and answer any questions. The students then present the results of their analyses in the third period.

For the third meeting I ask each group to informally present the results of their analyses, and as each student makes a point I write it on the board for all to see. I then ask the class to identify the features that the inventories shared in common and those that distinguish them from one another. How might these probate inventories compare to modern ones? How might these inventories from the period compare to those from eighteenth-century Europe? At the end of this period, I take ten minutes to show the class how the names we found in probate inventories can be cross-referenced to the data contained in the vital records for Essex County, which are found online under "Massachusetts Vital Records 1600-1849." Such information as marriages, births, and deaths can help us fill in some of the gaps in the information about family life and the household economy provided by the inventories. We can discover when the deceased was born, when he or she was married, and how many children the family had.

To complete the exercise, I ask each student to write up the results of their group work, including any additional information they could gather from the vital records. As with the group assignment, so with the individual assignment, they are asked to: (1) list the items in the inventory room by room; (2) draw a floor plan of the house in question; and (3) analyze the household economy based on the material found in the inventory, paying particular attention to the woman's role. Drawing on material covered in a previous assignment, I also ask them to include visual evidence about the material in question. This paper comes due the following week, at which point we move on to the next component of the course.

Conclusion

Rather than lecturing and "teaching" the students everything I knew about probate inventories, I decided to approach the material for this assignment cooperatively, transforming what we all knew as individual about the evidence and its meaning into a larger and more socially constructed understanding of the past.⁹ I did not abandon lecturing but made it part of a larger, more eclectic approach to learning that combined the transmission and processing of knowledge from the teacher with autonomous research on the part of the students, both as individuals and as groups.¹⁰

⁹Robert B. Barr and John Tagg, "From Teaching to Learning—A New Paradigm for Undergraduate Education," *Change*, 27:6 (1995).

¹⁰Morrone and Tarr, "Theoretical Eclecticism in the College Classroom;" J. Biggs, "Advantages and Limitations of the Lecture," in *Teaching for Quality Learning at University* (Buckingham: Open University Press, 1999), 98-102.

The organizing principle for this eclecticism was the Kolb model for experiential learning as modified for instructional design by Svinicki and Dixon.¹¹

According to D.A. Kolb, learning involves a cycle of four processes, each of which must be present for complete learning to take place. The first stage involves the learner in a specific educational experience, which in the second stage the learner reflects upon, seeking to find meaning. Out of this reflection, in the third stage, the learner abstracts concepts and comes to conclusions about the material, fitting these into a more theoretical understanding of the subject matter. Finally, the results are used to guide more active experimentation with the subject matter, leading to new concrete experiences.¹² Svinicki and Dixon argue that different activities support different phases of the cycle, and I follow their model in order to connect the disparate parts of the module: (1) the reading of secondary and primary sources gives learners firsthand experience with the content; (2) discussion and group work require students to reflect on their own experience and the experience of others; (3) the homework and assignments help foster abstract conceptualization and theoretical understanding; and finally (4) the use of primary data and cross-referencing require students to apply their interpretive models to novel problem situations.¹³ The experiential learning model thus provided the functional framework for our investigation of probate inventories. Its use in this module easily illustrates its adaptability.

Students respond well to this assignment, and they seem to appreciate the time spent on one aspect of historical investigation.¹⁴ They can cross reference the families in the inventories with the names in the vital records, and, while most provide photographs or drawings of the items listed, some also provide illustrations of house forms or of work areas where women might have spent their time. The historical picture that emerges, however, is a result of our collaboration. Typically all of the class members believe they are part of the production of knowledge, not simply recipients. These happy results are best explained by the learning-centered approach that informs the design of the assignment as a whole. The exercise shows the wisdom of the adage that education is more like lighting a fire than filling a bucket.

¹¹D.A. Kolb, *Experiential Learning: Experience as the Source of Learning and Development* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1984); Marilla D. Svinicki and Nancy M. Dixon, "The Kolb Model Modified for Classroom Activities," *College Teaching*, 35:4 (Fall 1987), 141-146.

¹²Svinicki and Dixon, 141.

¹³*Ibid.*, 142.

¹⁴This is judging by course evaluation questionnaires, in possession of the author.